

With both the French government and opposition in crisis, the door is open for Marine Le Pen to move firmly into the mainstream of French politics

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*French President François Hollande has suffered from consistently low approval ratings and his Socialist Party received exceptionally disappointing results in both the country's local and European elections earlier this year. As **John Gaffney** writes, however, the main opposition party, the UMP, has also been hit by a series of scandals, including the revelation that the party's finances contain debts of around 80 million euros. He argues that the issues being faced by the two mainstream parties are not only damaging their electoral chances, but fundamentally alienating voters from the political class. Ultimately both the left and right are laying the foundations for Marine Le Pen and the Front National to make an impact in the 2017 presidential elections.*



In France, since the European elections of May 2014, and Marine Le Pen's breath-taking 25 per cent of the vote – to the ruling Socialists' paltry 13 per cent – she has said very little. She does not need to; between them, the left and the right are opening up a royal road for her to go through to the second round of the presidential elections in 2017.

Hollande's unpopularity

The sitting President went down recently to an unheard of 18 per cent in the opinion polls. It is difficult to imagine what you have to do to fall so low. Since his election in 2012, he has achieved this unpopularity, which verges, even more ominously, on national indifference, through a whole series of miscalculations, unpreparedness for power, inaction – near inertia at times – government incompetence, inadequate policies or no policies, and a presidential style that is inappropriate to the office.

He is, in turns, like a headmaster at school assembly or else a jolly high street butcher, depending on the gravity of the occasion. His party and parliamentary majority are in danger of rebellion, against both him and his new (100 days in office) Prime Minister, Manuel Valls. They do not like Hollande anymore first because he is an electoral liability and second, because he is clearly – after two years of doing very little – trying to push Valls towards a reformist agenda, to cut the massive public debt and state spending, and stimulate business, so business in turn stimulates the economy.

For the left of the party, both are social democrats at best, social liberals at worst. It is arguable that few of their intended reforms – none of which has actually been implemented yet – will be adequate to the economic and social challenges ahead. Very little can happen before the detailed budget discussions in November; the government is looking for savings of at least 50 billion euros (a huge amount, yet still regarded as quite inadequate for recovery by most economists); 30 billion of which no one has any idea where it will come from.

In order to fend off its left, the unions, and placate its disintegrating constituency, every 'reformist' measure is countered by exceptions, special cases, and special summits between the 'social partners' whose political purpose is similar to Royal Commissions in the UK, in that their function is to put off any real decisions. Across most of Europe, the economic recovery is fragile; in France, the world's recently fifth, now sixth largest economy, it is virtually non-existent. And unemployment, at over 10 per cent, is still rocketing.

The UMP in crisis

In such circumstances, one would assume that the mainstream right, the **UMP**, Nicolas Sarkozy's party, would be

riding high and ready for power (until Valls' appointment in the aftermath of the devastating [local elections](#) in March, it was not unthinkable that Hollande might be forced to dissolve the National Assembly and call new legislative elections). The right, however, is in complete meltdown, raising questions about the viability of the republic itself.

Since Sarkozy's presidential defeat in 2012, the right has been bickering over leadership issues, while waiting to see if Sarkozy would make a comeback (making leadership renewal and party direction impossible). Since June, the situation has deteriorated to near-collapse. Three tsunamis have hit the party. The first is financial. The party has an inexplicable [80 million euro](#) deficit. A first remark to make is that, for the French, if the UMP cannot manage its own finances, it clearly could not manage the country's any better than the incompetent Socialists. Public confidence in the whole political class, therefore, is teetering on the edge of collapse.

The second tsunami to hit the UMP is made up of all the scandals that have exploded within and around the party. A lot of the party debt appears to have come from overcharging by a private company, Bygmalion – the French have a hopelessly unfunny compulsion for anglicised puns – used by the party leader Jean-François Copé (and run by close friends of his) for events, campaigns, and so on, has massively overcharged, particularly for services rendered during the Sarkozy campaign of 2012.

Some of Copé's team are also suspected of double invoicing and false accounting, all to the tune of about 20 million euros. Copé is also accused of paying four of his assistants 10,000 euros each per month and this in a party that made a cynical appeal in 2013 to the membership to help pay a 10,000,000 euros 'fine' (non-reimbursement of campaign funds by the state) for what was thought in 2013 to be overspending on the 2012 presidential campaign of a few hundred thousand euros.

The party membership raised the money and paid the fine. They are now leaving in droves.

Because of the Bygmalion scandal, Copé resigned as leader in June, and a triumvirate of former Prime Ministers (Raffarin, Juppé, and François Fillon) are now caretaker leaders who have ordered an inquiry into party finances. The inquiry has not yet reported, but the accusations of financial mismanagement, corruption even, are raining down on Copé regarding, for example, excessive travel expenses claims for his wife and others. The former Justice Minister and 'Sarkozyiste', Rachida Dati has been accused of charging the party 10,000 euros for her annual phone bill, and 13,000 for travel. The fact that she is a supporter of former President Sarkozy says a great deal, because the triumvirate, whose task is to bring probity, is really trying to block Sarkozy's return. They will not, however, in their turn, be spared the outpourings of financial irregularities about to be revealed, for this blood-letting has just begun.

Alongside this set of revelations, comes news of further deceit (it is all perfectly legal, the MPs and Ministers chime in chorus): Copé, for example, is paying his wife 5,000 euros per month, half of his research and administrative allowance allocated by the National Assembly. A hundred MPs are similarly paying family members. More revelations of this type appear each day. The UK expenses scandal and the public disillusion in its aftermath is nothing now to the generalised and deep disdain the French public have for the political class; and disdain in the UK usually means voter apathy, in France it more often means riots.

The main scandals, however, involve Sarkozy himself, and he goes from accusation to accusation, and recently spent 14 hours in custody. None of the accusations against Sarkozy have been proved; some of them have been dropped; most of them are accusations of a financial nature related to funding his campaign (Sarkozy, although in



Nicolas Sarkozy, Credit: Prime Minister of Greece (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

love with money and Rolexes, has never been involved in scandals linked to personal enrichment). In early July, however, he was also questioned over perverting the course of justice ('trafic d'influence'), offering favouritism in return for information on one of the financial scandals he was implicated in, the Liliane Bettencourt scandal. These scandals, one involving an apparent (unproven) gift of millions from Colonel Gadhafi as well as his probable involvement in the Bygmalion affair, seem to be coming perilously close to him, close enough to cripple his chances for a 2017 comeback.

The third tidal wave hitting the UMP is a consequence of the other two, namely, the public settling of scores, although this, of course, predates them in one sense in that it is linked to the very nature of the republic, the 'war of the chiefs'. The French Socialist Party was unprepared for government in 2012, largely because it had had little policy reflection since Lionel Jospin's defeat in 2002. The subsequent decade was simply a war of personalities at the top.

For the UMP, particularly in the aftermath of Sarkozy's 2012 defeat, it has been the same. It mainly took the form of an unending duel between François Fillon and Jean-François Copé in 2012-13. The result was a kind of stalemate, but the fallout was severe public dismay. Then, as Sarkozy seemed to be considering a return to politics as the providential hero to unite the right and dish the left, five major scandals caught up with him. The new 'triumvirate' has, in fact, brought all these rivalries to a head rather than placate them, and the party is in danger of imploding.

What does all this mean for the Fifth Republic?

First, the whole political class is held in total public disdain and derision. For the moment, the only party profiting from all this is the far right National Front. Marine le Pen does not even have to comment; as things stand, she is very possibly already through to round two of the 2017 presidential election. The whole issue is compounded by an overwhelming public disconnect from the political class' sense of privilege and 'suffisance', self-satisfaction, amongst many politicians at both national and town hall level. There is a generalised sense that the whole political class is as arrogant as it is ineffective as it is corrupt. This is not the reality, but it faces a mounting tide of populist outrage. And this brings us to the real significance of all of this incompetence and lack of accountability.

It is systemic, and the republic is arguably dysfunctional. The personalisation of politics, and the associated coteries, sycophancy, back-stabbing, and permanent intra-party strife have taken over the functioning of the Fifth Republic. All the parties are losing support. The atmosphere is not just one of a *fin de règne*, but sometimes of a *fin de régime*, as the Fifth Republic slides towards crisis.

Is there a way forward? In the UK, we are often bemused by the post-liberals of both the right and left and their appeals for a return to political virtue and a renewed search for the Common Good. In France, the political class would do well to reactivate the traditional political notions of courage, dedication, and integrity. I have always held the view that if President Hollande had brought in a series of ground-breaking reforms the morning after his election, reforms so bold they could lose you the election in 2017, he would have won it.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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